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Viewing cable 09ATHENS1725, University Asylum in Greece: When Democracy Goes Awry

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- The top box shows each cable's unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09ATHENS1725	2009-12-23 08:54	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Athens

Appears in these articles:

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SUBJECT: University Asylum in Greece: When Democracy Goes Awry

CLASSIFIED BY: Daniel V. Speckhard, Ambassador, State, EXEC; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

1. (C) Summary: A series of violent attacks against Greek academics in both Athens and Thessaloniki during the past month has fueled public debate over whether the university asylum law should be repealed to allow police officers to enter university grounds absent a formal request from university authorities. Both sides of the debate are vocal: leftist-leaning politicians and students oppose any change to the present law, which they claim is a beacon of free speech. Proponents of abolishing the law argue it is an outdated holdover from the early post-dictatorship years, irrelevant to today's Greek reality and nothing more than a legal cover for hoodlums to wreak destruction with impunity. The government appears unwilling to touch this political hot potato, tossing it instead to university rectors who are forced to choose between their own safety (when calling in authorities to intervene) and that of their students, faculty and premises (when they refrain from doing so). As debate continues over what to do with asylum, the broader cost of maintaining this policy (the only one of its kind in Europe) in terms of disrupted classes, missed semesters, delayed graduations, damage to university property, and psychological impact on administrators, faculty and the well-meaning student majority, is inestimable. End summary.

An Education in Violence

2. (C) In the year following the death of Alexis Grigoropoulos,

the teen who was accidentally shot by a police officer, leading to some of the worst rioting that Greece has ever seen, violence on Greek campuses continues. The respected and influential long-time rector of the University of Athens and Embassy contact, Christos Kittas, was recently severely beaten by assailants on university grounds. He resigned his post after suffering a heart attack following the assault. In his widely-publicized resignation letter, Kittas admonished Greece's youth that it is high time for them to find non-violent means to express themselves. Kittas is not the only victim of violence on university grounds. Also recently, a professor at the Athens University of Economics and Business, Gerasimos Sapountzoglou, was targeted by hoodlums who beat and choked him when he refused to stop a lecture. Anastassios Manthos, rector of Thessaloniki's Aristotle University, was knocked unconscious by students last year. Several other academics have suffered similar attacks in Athens and Thessaloniki over the past year, yet most avoided publicly condemning the assaults, fearing reprisals.

The Asylum Law: How Did We Get Here?

13. (C) The university asylum law was introduced in 1982 to protect freedom of thought and expression on university campuses, in the aftermath of the military dictatorship. The law stipulates that only university rectors and/or leadership have the right to invite police onto a campus. In reality, university administrators are extremely reluctant to do so, first and foremost because they fear for their own safety and second because doing so could instigate further violence on campus. To our knowledge, there have only been three instances when permission for the police to enter university grounds was requested: a) in 1985 at the sit-in at the Chemical Laboratory in Athens; b) in 1995 during a destructive sit-in at the Athens Polytechnic School; and c) in 2002 during the informal EU Defense Ministerial in Crete, when a police helicopter spotted marijuana plants in a field owned by the University of Crete and police officers were given permission to uproot 620 six-foot high marijuana plants.

Sacred Cow or Red Herring?

14. (C) In contrast, during the violent protests of December 2008 in which university grounds were targeted by hoodlums, university officials did not call in the police for fear that violence would escalate. Police remained well outside university walls as they were taunted by Molotov cocktail-throwing vandals from within. Since then, the topic of university asylum has been the subject of heated public and political debate. Leftist political parties and student groups in Greece support the current law, to protect free speech. Those in favor of repealing the law argue that it was enacted during a time when universities were the sole venues of tolerance and freedom. However, in today's stable Greek democracy, freedom of speech and thought are well protected already. As practiced today, they say, the law is supporting a system that encourages violent action without repercussions, allows lawlessness on campuses, provides a sanctuary for criminals, and threatens the academic and student communities.

Rectors Unite, Government Punts

15. (C) During an annual Rectors' Assembly in mid-December, the law was at the top of the agenda. Rectors agreed that the law should be seen as protecting freedom of speech in the classroom and research. The rectors stressed that the law has been misinterpreted to such an extent that it no longer protects these rights, but has become a facade for committing crimes and a tool for the violent imposition of opinions by the few. In the days following the assembly, there was significant public debate on how universities can protect themselves from acts of violence on campus. The Athens Law School took a bold step toward restricting access to its campus, proposing introducing a student ID system similar to that used by the Sorbonne and posting guards at its gates - an idea supported in principle by the opposition. Minister of Education Anna Diamantopoulou responded on behalf of the government, condemning the attack on Rector Kittas but stating that the current legislation regarding university asylum is sufficient as written, since it provides for universities to choose how best to protect their premises and allows for police involvement on campus at the invitation of rectors. Diamantopoulou also recommended the establishment of a duty rector on a daily basis in order to coordinate better with authorities in case of a sit-in or violence on campus.

16. (C) Diamantopoulou's claims may be aimed at appeasing leftist elements within the PASOK party and outside, but are opposed by others. University of Piraeus professor XXXXXXXXXXXX, educated in both the U.S. and the Greek systems, told us that university rectors and professors are cowed by the demonstrators and fear for their lives when they stand up to them, adding "they (hoodlums) know where they (administrators) live, and are not afraid to use this threat." Panteion University professor XXXXXXXXXXXX agreed that the troublemakers are adept at using intimidation tactics, including posting the names of targeted professors on a Greek anarchist website (hosted, incredibly, on the official Panteion University server) and disrupting classes. XXXXXXXXXXXX has resorted to hosting visiting lecturers off campus to

avoid yogurt-throwing attacks, or worse, by hooligans and in a recent international conference he paid 6,000 Euros for an off campus site rather than risk the disruption or even forced cancellation of the event if held on campus.

What About the Students?

17. (C) Although Greece's overwhelming majority of law-abiding, well-meaning students are those most directly affected by the violence on campus, for the most part they remain quietly resigned. XXXXXXXXXXXX estimates that the problems are created by approximately 2,000 hooligans - not all of them students - who are known to police but are never arrested or detained. In Greece, students elect student union representatives, who are affiliated with political parties. Because the vast majority of students abstain from the elections, in many cases leftist groups prevail in some departments - these are the most vocally supportive of university asylum as it is currently practiced. Student union representatives also hold the keys to the appointments of rectors and other administrative officials, representing 30 percent of the vote. As a result, according to both XXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXX, a client relationship between university administration and student groups has been established that makes it difficult for administrators to take a hard line on asylum. XXXXXXXXXXXX added that even political parties sometimes cannot control their own student unions, as when the New Democracy-affiliated student union at the Athens Law School was reprimanded by newly-elected ND party leader Antonis Samaras for opposing a proposal put forward by the university administration for the creation of student IDs. Even parents of students appear resigned to the phenomena of missed semesters and delayed graduations.

The Social and Financial Costs are Staggering

18. (C) The extent to which a small number of troublemakers has succeeded in confusing the concepts of freedom of speech and freedom of movement is troubling, as are the social and financial costs involved. Campuses have become havens for criminals, most of which are involved in crimes such as drug trafficking, assault, theft, counterfeiting of DVDs and CDs, looting and vandalism. Greece's universities, instead of providing a stable learning environment for Greece's future professionals and leaders, have become a war zone where police are afraid to show up, administrators are afraid to stand up and students are afraid to speak up. Due in large part to constant disruptions to classes, the average Greek student takes six years to complete a four-year degree. Greek universities spend a whopping 12 percent of their budgets each year to repair damage to university premises and equipment caused by violence on campuses.

What Next?

19. (C) The fact that changes to the university asylum law are even being discussed is a big step forward for Greek society, an indication that, for many, this formerly sacred legislation may be past its prime and no longer applicable to today's reality. The Polytechnic revolution generation has become parents now, and their children are reaping the not-so-generous benefits of a concept for which they fought, which has now been distorted by common criminals. Public debate notwithstanding, however, at this time there does not appear to be the political will by the current government to repeal the law. Traditionally, PASOK has been viewed as a champion of all that the asylum law - in its intended form - has represented. Insiders fear that repealing the asylum law would cause a serious rift within the party, particularly within its student and youth ranks. Tossing the ball back to university rectors rather than initiating a more forceful approach to violence on university campuses appears to be the preferred path of least resistance, for now, for this government. In discussions with Embassy officers, faculty and university administrators describe a prevailing sense of fear and intimidation on many campuses. The irony is that, due to the asylum law and the inability to protect students and professors who dissent from hard line views, the only place in Greece where freedom of thought is severely restricted is on university campuses themselves.

Speckhard